

FRED BOWEN Series
SPORTS STORY

THE GOLDEN GLOVE

FRED BOWEN





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Summary: When Jamie, a twelve-year-old shortstop, loses the glove that "magically" helped him make fantastic catches, he wonders whether it was the sole secret of his success. Includes a history of baseball gloves.

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ONE

One fine, breezy Saturday morning, the first good Saturday morning after a long, cold winter, the telephone rang in Jamie Bennett's house.

"Hello," Jamie said, with a bit of sleep still in his voice.

"Hey, Jamie," shouted Alex Hammond, Jamie's best friend. "Everybody's getting together to play baseball today."

"Where?" Jamie asked, suddenly wide awake.

"Green Street. On the big field."

"When?"

"In about half an hour."

"Great. I'll be there."

"Don't forget your glove," Alex reminded him.

“Don’t worry, I won’t.”

After a quick breakfast, Jamie put on his baseball shirt—an orange T-shirt with “GIANTS” printed in block letters across the front and the number “8” on the back—and ran to his closet. He reached up on tip-toes and pulled down his glove from the cluttered closet shelf.

The glove looked great—even tied shut with old shoelaces. Jamie sat at the edge of his bed and happily loosened the shoelaces one by one. When he was finished, the glove yawned open and Jamie removed the baseball he had placed there so carefully last winter.

He had taken good care of his glove just as he had been instructed to do.

“Put a few drops of oil in the pocket,” Pete had said. Pete Bikakis was the owner of the sports shop in town. “Then take a smooth, dry rag and rub the oil around the pocket. Let the glove sit for a while so the oil will dry. Then toss a ball around with it for a while. Wrap it up with the ball still inside and put it in a nice, safe place. Take it out and oil it a couple more times during

the winter. Treat it right and it will treat you right in the spring.”

Jamie had followed all of Pete’s instructions. Now, the tan leather around the middle of the glove was darkened from the neat’s-foot oil he had smoothed on the glove throughout the long winter months.

Although the leather was a rich, dark brown, Jamie could still make out the signature in the center: José Reyes, a short-stop. Just like Jamie.

Jamie slipped his left hand into the cool leather and smiled. The glove felt just as wonderful as the first day he had tried it on at Pete’s Sports Shop a year ago.

Jamie and a couple of his friends had stopped by Pete’s after school and had tried on a few gloves just for fun. Jamie was not really looking for a new glove, but when his fingers slid into the José Reyes model, he knew he had to have it.

That night, Jamie begged his parents to buy him the glove.

“I don’t know, Jamie,” his father said cautiously. “That’s a lot of money for a baseball glove.”

“Please, Dad. It could be an early birthday present.”

“You already have a glove.”

“I know, Dad, but this one is perfect,” Jamie pleaded. “If I had this glove, I could be the best fielder in town.”

Jamie’s parents looked at each other.

“Okay,” his father said, “but you’d better take good care of it.”

“I promise!” said Jamie.

Now, a year later, Jamie looked at the glove and how perfectly it had molded to his hand. The glove had been a good-luck charm throughout last year’s season. His fielding had improved, and his team had won most of its games.

He took the ball from the well-formed pocket and flipped it high into the air over and over again. He started imagining himself as a real-life major leaguer catching the ball with smooth backhand grabs, basket catches, and over-the-shoulder stabs.

“Bennett’s going way back,” Jamie said in his best baseball-announcer voice as he lofted the ball across his bedroom.

“He leaps.” Jamie dove toward his bed with his glove stretched out to the falling ball.

“He’s got it. What a catch by Bennett!” Jamie announced, sprawled on the covers and clutching the ball happily.

The glove was still perfect.

Then with a smile and a whoop of pure joy, Jamie headed out the door to another season of baseball.

GLOVES

THE REAL STORY

In the early days of baseball, ballplayers did not wear baseball gloves. The players caught the ball with their bare hands. (The players needed both hands to catch the ball.)

Playing catcher wasn't easy back then. A catcher's hands got badly bruised from the constant thump of fast-flying balls. In 1869, Doug Allison, a catcher for the Cincinnati Red Stockings, asked a saddle maker to make him a pair of leather gloves to protect his sore hands. Allison was probably the first player to wear a glove in a baseball game.

It was a while before other players followed Allison's example. Players worried

that people would call them “babies” and think they weren’t tough enough to play without gloves. In 1875, Charles Waitt, a second-rate outfielder for the St. Louis Brown Stockings, began to wear gloves the color of his skin. He was hoping nobody would notice, but people made fun of him anyway. The opposing fans hooted at him when he walked out onto the field.

Eventually ballplayers began swallowing their pride and putting on gloves. Albert Goodwill Spalding, the great Chicago White Stockings pitcher, was the player who turned things around. In 1877 he moved from the pitcher’s mound to first base and started wearing a black leather glove. Nobody made fun of Spalding. They didn’t dare. He was a superstar. Instead of laughing at him, players imitated him, buying gloves of their own. Some of the players bought their gloves from Spalding’s sporting goods store in Chicago. The Spalding company, still in business today, sells sports equipment—including baseball gloves—all over the world.

The gloves of the late 1800s were nothing like today's baseball gloves. Their only purpose was to protect the players' hands. No one had thought of designing a glove that actually helped players catch the ball.



Early fingerless glove

The early gloves looked like heavy work gloves—like something a brick-layer might wear.

Players often cut the fingers off the gloves because they wanted to keep their fingers free for throwing the ball. For extra padding, some players slipped strips of meat, cotton, or grass into their gloves.

In 1883, Arthur “Doc” Irwin, a shortstop for a team called the Providence Grays, broke two fingers playing ball and asked a glove maker to make him a glove with extra padding. The oversized, padded glove the glove maker created did more than protect his hands; it actually improved his fielding. Other players watched Irwin

make incredible catches and decided they needed oversized padded gloves, too. Glove makers started to make more of them.

Two big breakthroughs came around 1920. A pitcher for the St. Louis Cardinals, Spittin' Bill Doak, came up with the idea of a preformed pocket that would help players hang onto the ball. Doak also came up with the idea of lacing pieces of rawhide



1922 Rawlings Bill Doak glove

between the thumb and the first finger of his glove. It made a web to help catch the ball. The rawhide lacing was more flexible than the wide patch of stiff leather that connected the thumb to the first finger on the early gloves.

Doak took his ideas to the Rawlings sporting goods company and Rawlings knew they were winners. The Bill Doak improvements changed the way players thought about gloves. Finally, here was a glove that was specially designed to improve fielding. Orders started coming in from all over the country.

The Bill Doak glove has become bigger and better through the years. Since the 1920s, baseball gloves have doubled in size:



1940s Nokona three-fingered fielder's glove—two fingers fit into the little finger channel

from six inches to twelve inches from the heel to the tip of the fingers. In present-day baseball, fewer errors are committed, fielding averages are higher, and ballplayers make catches every day that would

have been unthinkable long ago.

But it has never been the glove that made players great—Hall of Famers like Pittsburgh Pirates short-stop Honus Wagner, made some extraordinary plays with some “un-extraordinary” gloves.



1950s Rawlings “Deep Well” fielder's glove

Pete's advice to Jamie is true. From the early days when players like Doug Allison, Charles Waitt, and Albert Spalding strapped on the first baseball gloves, "it's never been the glove that made the ballplayer. It's always been the other way around."

Guidance for glove illustrations taken from VINTAGE BASEBALL GLOVE PRICE GUIDE, Vol. 1, No. 1 © 1922 by Joe Phillips and Dave Bushing.